

THE SPIRIT MAIDEN OF RHINE-LAND.

BY MEETA.

It was almost evening; the sun was sinking upon its imperial couch of gorgeous clouds, whilst beautiful beams of crimson and gold were reflected through the trees. The calm, broad-bosomed Rhine slept along its green-embowered banks, and the dying sun-rays twinkled and flashed in its blue depths.

The summer air was soft, and sweet as a breath of roses; and a gush of dreamy melody from some idling bark upon the water, stole as a "spirit's presence" over the earth.

Paul stood at the door of his father's mansion, watching the changing colors of the beautiful landscape. His heart was overflowing with a burst of tumultuous emotions, thanksgiving and praise to the Watchful One. He turned his head over his shoulder, and glanced back into the chamber which he had but just left: there, in his accustomed place, the evening glow tinging his silvery locks, sat the blind and aged father, and at his side, upon a low stool, was seated his young cousin, the meek and fair-haired Bertha.

The maiden held her lute, and her white fingers glanced like snow-flakes over the glistening chords as she played a light wild melody. She was singing a Rhinish love-song, and her voice, so sweet and low, fell like the tones of a silver bell upon the evening air.

A soft and holy influence was enveloping Paul's senses; but he thought he saw a white figure glancing in the wood, and a spirit-voice seemed calling to him, as it said—

"Paul! Paul! where art thou?"

The voice called, and the echoes caught the wild, witching melody, and Paul knew that it was the voice of his spirit-maiden singing to him. He walked forth into the wood with a saddened heart, and seated himself upon a mossy stone.

"Etheria! Etheria! here is thy Paul," he called in answer; but the voice was silent, and he heard only the sound of the wind, as it moved in the leaves, or the dreamy tinklings of the fountain.

Paul had never seen his spirit-maiden, save in his dreams, when she came to him clothed in all her virgin beauty, and whispered to him of her love. But she floated upon every gold-tinted cloud. She smiled in the shining sunlight, and breathed words of love in the beautiful flowers. He saw her not, and yet he loved.

The sun was gone quite down and had left, as a remembrance of what had passed, and what was yet to be, a crown of glorious rose-clouds lingering in the sky. Paul wandered again sorrowfully towards the mansion. Bertha was sitting at the tablette, with her Bible open before her, and she read to the aged man the holy words. Never had she looked so lovely. Her soft blue eyes were filled with tears as she read, and her bright, fair hair fell like a beautiful veil over her neck and shoulders. As Paul gazed upon her beauty, a gleam of flashing silver light glanced through the apartment; but an instant, and it was gone again. It was not the moonlight—it was the smile of the spirit-maiden.

And Paul thought no more of the fair Bertha, but mourned for his soul's shadow.

When the devotion was over, Bertha led the old man to his chamber, and returning again, found Paul sitting listless and gloomy.

"Paul," whispered the beautiful Rhinish maiden, as she laid her hand gently upon his arm, "thou art sorrowful, and I may not comfort thee."

Her tones were very sad and reproachful. Paul drew her towards him and kissed her fair brow.

"I am sorrowful, my beloved Bertha," he said, mournfully, "for I must leave this beautiful Rhineland—my spirit-love awaiteth me. Hearest thou not her voice calling me? See'st thou not her wavy tresses beckoning me?—My love awaiteth me, and I may not stay."

Bertha knew of his strange love for the spirit-maiden, and she bowed her face amid her ringlets, and wept.

"Weep not, my beloved one," said Paul, in a soothing voice; "weep not, I shall soon return again, and thy heart shall be made glad by the gay smiles and witching tones of my own spirit-maiden."

Bertha pushed back the drooping tresses from her weeping face, and gliding from his embrace, reached the door.

"Paul," she whispered, sadly, "when thou art far distant, forget not the maiden of Rhineland."

Alas! Paul knew not the deep and holy love which rested in that innocent heart for him.

Paul reclined upon his couch, but slept not. The moon looked down at him, and the stars

twinkled and danced in the sky. A voice full of mirth and witchery came floating on the breeze, and whispering in the leaflets. Paul arose from his couch, and stealing from his chamber, gained the open air. With quickened foot-steps he reached the wood, and hastened to the fountain. And there, among the trees, stood a maiden of wondrous beauty, clad in shadowy garments, beckoning and smiling through the shower of the fountain.

Paul sprang to catch the beautiful form in his embrace; but, as he came nearer, it still receded—the mirthful tones still calling—

“Paul! Paul! where art thou?”

Sometimes she hid among the trees, and then again her soft breath fanned his cheek, and her dark tresses fell like a cloud over his face. Now she vanished in a wreath of spray, or seemed lost in her own strain of fairy music, and then she floated in the moonlight smiling, and waving her white arms. But ever sang she, and ever followed the youth.

Paul stood upon the summit of a high mountain, whither he had followed his spirit-love. His father’s mansion was lost to view, and the spirit-maiden had vanished in a mist of snow—her voice was hushed. He had reached the highest peak: but he was alone—the clouds above, and the snow below. He thought he heard the vesper-bell ringing on the air, and Bertha’s voice reading the evening devotion: the lulling sound of dreamy whisperings bewildered him, and he sank upon the ground insensible.

The years pass by in their varied attire, ever choosing a new devotee to worship at the shrines of bitter sorrow, or awakening hopes. The aged father was long since dead, and was buried upon the banks of the beautiful Rhine. The witchern drooped its branches over his grave, and the “sad bird” sang mournfully in the green leaves.

The gentle Bertha dwelt alone in the old mansion, more beautiful and more beloved than before. She often thought of her old love, Paul, but he had disappeared years ago, and was perhaps buried in a foreign land. Thus, like a fair lily, she bloomed in sequestered loveliness upon the banks of the Rhine, ever modest, gentle, and meek.

One lovely day, when the summer had returned again in fragrance and flowers, Bertha sat at her lattice netting a silken fillet to bind her fair tresses. Old memories came crowding around her heart, and tears trembled upon her golden lashes. She thought of one so dear to her heart—Paul. A tall, sun-burnt man, with a saddened, care-worn look upon his features, came slowly up the pathway which led to the door. He was changed—much changed and older, but Bertha’s heart knew that it was Paul. He reached the door-way—Bertha threw down her silken net, and, gliding to the door, cried—“Paul! Paul! is it thou?”

In an instant, he folded her in his arms, and she rested weeping and smiling upon his breast.

“And the spirit-maiden, Paul?” asked the fair Bertha, as they sat, side by side, in the father’s hall, as in days of yore.

“Ask me not, Bertha,” he answered, in a low

voice, as he pressed her hand still closer in his, “ask me not. It is enough, alas! too much to know, that I sought for the Ideal, and knew not the true value of the Real. Had I but dreamed how fond and true was the gentle heart that beat for me in mine own Rhineland, then would the spirit-maiden have been, indeed, as a shadow.”

Bertha felt that she was beloved at last, and she rested her fair cheek fondly upon his bosom, whispering—

“Oh, Paul! shall we not be happy now?”

Many—ah, how many have deserted the substance, which was within their grasp, for the shadow, which, uncertain, flits hither and thither! Ideal bliss takes wings and flies away; real happiness folds its pinions amid the flowers of earth, nor seeks a better resting place. The substance places a wreath of emerald around the heart, unchanging in its hues; the shadow rests in the soul as an opal, with its many beauties. Then, seek not for a happiness greater than that of the present hour; the morn arises in golden beauty, but the night may be a clouded sky, starless and unsearchable.

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